



The Actress Meets her Character

by E.D.B.

The auditorium lights dim, the house darkens and the stage lights reveal the action of the drama as the exhausted and emotionally drained director sits in the back seat of the crowded auditorium and almost weeps with nostalgic pride. "We made it!" she thinks with mixed emotions and takes a deep breath. She no longer holds the stop watch, pencil and well-worn notebook which she somehow misses. These items had not only been tools of the trade for practical purposes, but had also served as an excuse not to become involved in the lives of the actors and actresses presently moving through the well rehearsed drama. She must now acknowledge some modification of this directorial process. How this modification originated begins to flood back to her.

All the volunteer actors and actresses had worked very hard on the drama and it was obvious that many of them had also struggled with personal problems as they rehearsed. But one of the actresses' problems had significantly changed the thrust of the play for herself and the director.

Masha, beautiful Masha, with her quiet reserved presence moves per the planned blocking with an eloquent dignity deserving of the Chekhovian character. Her tall physique, sad face and almost too large eyes register the rebellion and pain of the character thwarted in her desire to go "home to Moscow."

"This life is damnable, unbearable . . ." Masha is saying with what seems an energy potential of an atom bomb.

"My God, Stanislavsky himself could not make a more believable transfer of emotions in real life into emotions of the character. There couldn't be an audience member present who did not identify with her even as the others keep speaking," the overwhelmed director thinks with pride and remembers the day her Masha had dropped by her home to get the blocking she had missed, and to discuss the details of characterization.

The director had noticed the bloodshot eyes, scratches and bruises but had made no comment about them because of her firm belief that the creative process worked better if it avoided unnecessary detours into personal problems. "They can become crutches to too many artists," she had just told her acting class that week. "Yet this seems different . . . almost a cry for help . . . I'll stick to the purpose of the meeting and let her initiate any personal encounter," she had thought as she quickly gave the blocking for the two missed rehearsals. No apology was offered, nor asked for, by either. Then they began to discuss Masha's character. One would give an interpretation and then the other.

"She is the most exceptional of the three sisters. She is the most intelligent and gifted."

"She is free and expects more from life, yet finds it 'empty, empty.'"

"Her situation seems more hopeless than that of either of the other sisters. Yet her strength seems to offer more potential for escape." Identification was beginning.

As the analysis continued, there was no question on the part of both that the actress was drawing some major parallels in her character and her personal life. The rapport was there between them and a human being was making up her mind that she could be free and happy in spite of the suffering the world was offering her. Then the actress spoke quietly and gently as though from an extension of her character. The sensitivity of the speaker contrasted so radically with the shock of the words that the director flinched and felt the pounding of unbelief in her head and an ache of pity in her heart so overwhelming that it seemed to freeze.

"I was not at the last two rehearsals because I was raped by three hoodlums last Saturday evening. My casual date and I were forced at gunpoint to take off all our clothes. They made him watch and then rolled us both under a car and said they would kill us if we came out." There was a long pause as their eyes met and held contact for what seemed like a lifetime to the director. The latter was witnessing the most startling request for an explanation of this inhumanity to another being but she had no words in her to speak. The actress seemed to understand and turned away and said, "Please don't tell my mother. There is no way she could handle this." The other nodded in agreement.

"You think you're o.k. now?"

"Yes, we went to a friend's house nearby and he took us to the hospital."

"I mean emotionally, too. There's lots of available help, you know?"

"I know," she said, "but I'm sure if Masha can handle all the problems Chekhov gives her, I can surely handle this one." She stopped and again looked straight into the eyes of the director and spoke firmly and pointedly, "This role is the greatest challenge I have ever had and nothing must interfere with its artistic development."

The conversation was back to the play and the characterization was once again confronted but now both could make parallels between Masha's frustration and the actress's without looking for remote examples. They

continued to dissect the role.

"Masha cannot understand why her world has to be so cruel, yet she expresses hope when she says '... man must have faith, or he must look for faith.' Even in a depressed mood she says, 'Oh, my, life is beautiful.'"

"She has a keen drive to find a way out of her boredom and frustration."

They both became aware of the significance of the developing interpretation of a play and how it was becoming an interpretation for a real life. The desperate hunt for hope and beauty in a confused life became stronger in both the actress and the character and continued throughout the rehearsal period. Now on the stage before an attentive audience the insight is electrifying. The play is nearing the end, "the band is playing joyfully," the sisters are watching their last hope disappear and we hear Masha say, "... we are left alone to begin our life over again. We must live... We must live..." Tears stream down her face and the audience cries with her.

Backstage the director says to the actress, "Thank you for your hard work."

"Thank you," she replies, "I think I know what it means to be an actress." She smiles gratefully through happy tears. "Masha and I have become supportive friends." The director now realizes that Masha, the character, has done what she could never do. Then they both turn to greet their public now filling the backstage area.

Untitled

by Thomas E. Fitch

the lamprey bites
and kicks and fights
to get from head to heart
the eyes the brains
he gnaws the veins
he devours every part
of the body the fiend
he scratches and screams
and finally reaches the spine
he rends he tears
he scatters and spares
nothing of the mind
the neck the throat
the lungs and note
he does not leave the tongue
his bloody beak
goddamn the reek
he sucks the heart the dung!-

now you sit by
and fail to hide
your look of malcontent;
your friends just say,
"it's not your day."
then what to do? regret.